

ALIENATION IN LEILA ABOULELA'S *THE TRANSLATOR*

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ABSTRACT

The theme of alienation is a characteristic feature of Anglo- Arab writers who lived in Britain and wrote in English. This paper studies the theme of alienation in Leila Aboulela's The Translator, together with its different philosophical, psychological, sociological, Existential, Marxist, and Hegelian forms, and show how the novel's heroine Sammar is a multi-alienated female character. Moreover, the paper tries to identify the main reasons of this alienation among which are frustrated love, the failure to adjust to social conditions, and ethnic and religious prejudice.

KEYWORDS : Alienation, Anglo-Arab writers, Leila Aboulela, the Translator

Received: Oct 20, 2016; **Accepted:** Nov 08, 2016; **Published:** Nov 09, 2016; **Paper Id.:** IJELDEC20165

INTRODUCTION

Alienation is a characteristic feature of modern life, of which Edward Said thinks "as spiritually orphaned and alienated, the age of anxiety and estrangement"(173). According to Schacht, "there is almost no aspect of contemporary life which has not been discussed in terms of alienation"(3). The term has been discussed linguistically, psychologically, economically, and sociologically in ways that greatly affected modern world literature. Linguistically, as Mona Abousenna remarks, the word is derived from the Latin noun "alienatio" which means to take away or remove(12). Psychologically, the word is meant to " make estrange, to estrange, or turn away the feelings or affections of anyone, to convert into an alien or stranger, to make averse or hostile or unwelcome" (Starzyk 420). It is also "the exile of the emotion of hope, of trust - sent away somewhere so they won't betray us"(Gass 107)). As a an intellectual concept, the word is first used by Rousseau to mean "to give or to sell"(3). For the welfare of society, every individual should totally alienate himself to community, i. e. to sell all his rights to community(44).

Alienation is used philosophically by Hegel to mean an essential feature of man to produce things, which become alien to man himself. In the first sense, it means estrangement, separation, loss of identity when a man stops identifying himself with society and begins to be self-centered. In this way, man "alienates [himself] from [his] inner nature and arrives at the extreme discordance with himself (535).

Carl Marx used the term economically and socially. He identified four main forms of alienation: man's alienation from labor, from himself, from his species being, and from other men. In man's alienation from labor, the work is not voluntary, but imposed on man. It is not "the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs". This leads to man's feeling of misery, and his mental and physical exhaustion (Marx 98-99). In man's alienation from himself , man sees his activity as directed against him, independent of him, and not belonging to him. This leads to man's suffering and powerlessness (99-100). Man's alienation from his species being alienates from man " his own body, external nature , his mental life and human life " (103). The final type of man's alienation is his alienation from other men. It is an urgent result of man's alienation from himself. Abousenna thinks that

the first and fourth types of alienation are consequences of the second and third(27).

Psychologically, the concept of alienation is discussed by Erich Fromm and Karen Horney. According to Fromm, alienation is a "mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as alien to [himself]" Thus, an alienated man, as Fromm sees him, is "out of touch with any other person"(110). Karen Horney describes alienation as man's "loss of the feeling of being an active determining force in his own life. It is the loss of feeling himself as an organic whole (157).

Sociologically, alienation means man's separation from some aspect in society, his powerlessness, meaninglessness, and his "feeling of loneliness and yearning for supportive primary relationship"(MacClosky & Schaar 30). It is the feeling of isolation which results from the absence of significant relationships with fellow people. Unable to prove his own identity, this alienated man is forced to flight, either physically or spiritually. In this respect, an alienated man is seen as "uncomfortably different" from others as a result of "one's views... interests...personal tastes" (Hajda37).

The main problem that occupied Existentialist philosophers is man's alienation from himself, or "the shock that seizes" man when he apprehends "the look of the Other". In apprehending that look, Sartre thinks, man is alienated from himself(Sartre 55). This leads to man's recognition of the world as meaningless, his obsession with his imminent death, and his passion to live(Abousenna 32). There is no escape from man's alienation since it is rooted in his nature. Existentialists see the world as absurd and man as an isolated "cast" into this meaningless universe. According to Abousenna, Existentialists see alienated man as a destroyed, lost cast into a strange, meaningless, absurd universe. The alienated man is in desperate, useless search for a lost identity (Abousenna 32-33). It is against the previous philosophical, psychological, sociological, Existential, Marxist, and Hegelian types of alienation, together with the following biographical information about Aboulela herself, that we are going to discuss the theme of alienation in *The Translator*, and show how the novel's heroine Sammar is a multi-alienated female character.

Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese- Egyptian- English writer who was born in Cairo of a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother in 1964. She grew up in Cairo, moved to Khartoum where she received her education and graduated in 1985. In 1990 she moved to Scotland where she started to write while looking after her children. Between 2000 and 2012 she lived in Jakarta, Dubai, and Doha, but is currently living in Aberdeen. Aboulela is one of the most prominent Anglo-Arab writers who live in Britain and write in English. Other prominent writers are the Sudanese Jamal Mahjoub, the Palestinian Tony Hanania, the Jordanian Fadia Faqir, and the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif. These writers are of Arab origins and their work was executed in English. They form what Edward Said calls "the Anglo - Arab Encounter", and are influenced by several factors, including "spaces first opened by the later twentieth century creation of international audiences and markets for non-Anglo-Saxon literature in English"(11). Ameen Rihani ascribes the immigration of these Arab writers to Britain and America to the following four social, cultural, intellectual, and human motives: seeking for prosperity, education, dialogue with the west, and the departure from the regional circle to the international horizons(17-34)

Aboulela's *The Translator* was nominated for the Orange Prize and was chosen as a notable book of the year by the New York Times in 2006. Writing from her experience of living in Scotland, Aboulela tells the story of the eponymous translator Sammar who was born in Aberdeen for Sudanese parents and has been taken to her home country when she was seven. There, she spent her youth, got married and came back to Aberdeen when her husband Tarig wanted to complete his study in Britain. Shortly after their arrival, Tarig died in a car accident and Sammar returned to Khartoum

with her British born son Amir. Owing to the strict, rigid social rules of her mother-in-law, Sammar did not last long in Sudan. She returned to Aberdeen, leaving her son with her aunt and mother-in-law in her home country, and working as a translator at Aberdeen University. Here the narrative begins where Sammar is living a lost, meaningless life, longing for the warmth of her country, with the memories of her dead husband and her estranged son. To escape her alienation, she falls in love with Rae Isles, an Orientalist teaching in the same department where Sammar works. She does her best to make him converted to Islam to be able to marry him but in vain. They quarrel with each other and Sammar returns to Khartoum. For the first time in her life, she lives a normal life where she feels the warmth of her homecountry and takes care of her neglected son Amir. But, again, she suffers her mother-in-law's strict, rigid social rules. After a while, her Scottish lover Rae converts to Islam, comes to Khartoum, marries her and the couple return to Aberdeen. This narrative takes a period of one year, from one December to another, starting in Aberdeen and ending in Khartoum.

The above mentioned background is pertinent for understanding the theme of alienation in Aboulela's *The Translator*, which is considered the qualifying feature of the novel. The paper is concerned with studying this central theme together with its different forms. Moreover, the paper will try to identify the main reasons of this alienation among which are frustrated love, the failure to adjust to social conditions, and ethnic and religious prejudice.

First of all, Sammar's work as a translator is very significant. In the words of Aboulela herself, "she is not only translating Arabic into English, she's also translating Islam for Rae"(Chambers 93). That is why Islam is a central and important theme which is used to project the concept of alienation in the novel. Again, Sammar's work as a translator reflects her attempt to translate "her own alienation into a purposeful living"(Dimitriu 76). And the novel itself is described as working hard to "achieve an interrogation of the feasibility of translating the human being-as-text between cultures"(Stotesbury 76). In this way, Sammar's work as a translator serves as a bridge between two religions and two cultures, besides being a bridge between two languages. In Arabic, the word "sammar" means entertainment. Here Aboulela may mean that Sammar is an irresponsible woman who has alienated herself from her own son and went abroad to entertain herself.

From a Marxist perspective, Sammar's labor is totally alienated from her. This is because it is not "the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs"(Marx 98-99) i. e. for the satisfaction of her desire to make Rae convert to Islam and then to get married to him. For after the death of her husband's Tarig, she comes back to her home country accompanied by her son Amir. But she could not comply with the strict, rigid, social rules of her mother-in-law. That is why she spends there a short time and comes back to Aberdeen. It is very strange and unjustified to leave her own son, the most precious and valuable possession in the world, and return to Aberdeen where her "focus became the hospital room"(29)¹. Whatever the reason may be, it is unacceptable in an eastern, Muslim society to leave an estranged son and go to a foreign country for work. That is why Sammar has a "feeling of misery rather than well-being", as her work is "not voluntary but imposed, forced labor", and she is physically exhausted and mentally debased", important features of Marx's alienation of labor(98-99). This type of alienation is found in the novel where we are told that Sammar "stepped into a hallucination"(21) as "she felt tired, deflated"(22). Her labor alienation is epitomized in the following passage at the end of chapter two:

She could hardly open her eyes to put the key in the lock, light was a source of suffering. And a headache, pain greater than childbirth. Inside, she wanted to hit her head against something to dislodge what was inside. Sleep...

¹ All references to Aboulela's *The Translator* are from the 1999 Heinemann edition, Johannesburg.

would not come now. The silence, the absence of pain, would not come(22-23)

Thus, Sammar's work as a translator is used to achieve marriage to the western Rae, and consequently to convert him to Islam. That is why Geoffrey Nash says that " it is winning over of Rae to this inner Islamic core that constitutes the challenge of the novel"(30). Her insistence on winning Rae and making him convert to Islam makes her totally neglect her son and totally forget about him. And this is against the principles of eastern society, and against the principles of Islam, to which Sammar pretends to stick. It is also against the principles of all other religions. Sammar tries to deceive herself and deceive us that she is doing a noble thing: to make Rae convert to Islam to become a devote Muslim, even if the price was to desert our sons, whom Islam honours as our livers walking on earth.

Self-alienated person, according to Marx , sees "his own activity as something alien and not belonging to him, activity as suffering, strength as powerlessness, creation as emasculation"(99-100). In *The Translator*, Sammar feels the same feeling, for she "worked hard pushing Arabic into English, English into Arabic, staying up late with hotel smells, typing out all the interviews. She looked as weary as the young men she put the questions to every day, thin and disillusioned"(159). This is because her mind is not busy translating texts, but busy how to plot to win Rae and make him converted to Islam. At the same time, her conscience pricks her for not being honest in doing her job.

Sammar's alienation from man's species life is represented in her neglect of her duty as mother to satisfy her sensual desires. She herself affirms that she is "unable to mother the child" and that " the part of her that did the mothering had disappeared"(7) . Her only occupation now is "to look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerising as the Afghan princess she had once seen on Tv wearing hijab"(9). Here Sammar works for herself, not for the whole of humanity. Her work is done to appear as a national heroine (like the Afghan princess) or a leader (like Bhutto) whose intention to achieve religious conquest by making the western Rae convert to Islam while, at the same time , she is hostile and neglectful of her son.

According to Marx, man's alienation from his labor, his alienation from himself, and from his species- being lead inevitably to his alienation "from other persons"(103). Marx thinks that man is a creative being, "a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic", but when he alienates his labor from himself, he alienates his human essence from himself, and consequently, from other persons (103). This is applied to Sammar, who deserts her own homeland, her own family, her own only son, to work in Aberdeen. There, she lives at her room, " the hospital room"(66), where "things did not have a smell"(67). She left the warmth of her home country , where everything is normal for her and implants herself in " this stupid weather and stupid snow"(131) and" suffers in the alien British cold"(65). All the time she was dreaming of her home country, of the cloudless sky, but "this was Scotland, and the reality left her dulled", and she "stepped into a hallucination in which the world had swung around"(21), as "if there a fog blocking her vision, a dreamy heaviness everywhere"(67). In short, as Tina Steiner points out, "her senses are not stimulated, and this lack reinforces her sense of isolation"(15).

Sammar's alienation from other people is very clear in her hostility to her son, who "demanded her totally" and " would not let her sink like she wanted to sink"(8). In Scotland, her "focus became the hospital room"(29) where she totally alienates herself from other people as she watches " from the window people doing what she couldn't do"(30). Rae himself warns her of this big plight in Scotland. For him, "loneliness is Europe's malaria..., no one really be immune"(103).

Existentially, Sammar is an African immigrant who is trying to implant herself in this cruel, "alien British

cold"(65) , where she was " afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this country"(3). She feels nothingness, solitude, isolation, confining herself in her "hospital room" , where the "absence of pain would not come", and where sleep was " desperate unconsciousness"(23). She has no contact with the outside world over which she has no power and where " no one can really be immune"(102). Here, as William Gass points out, "alienation is the exile of the emotion of hope, of trust- sent away somewhere so they won't betray us"(Gass 107). No one listens to her, no one is immune to her. In short, she has lost her identity and is struggling against the unknown.

In her desperate attempt to prove herself, Sammar resorts to faith and love, both of which increase her alienation and deepen her plight. All the time she sticks to religion, has "a sheet of paper from the mosque with the times of prayer for each day" to do her daily five prayers(32). At the end of a fast day, she " would eat a date first, drink water, pray, and then she would eat the rice she had made earlier"(32), strict Islamic rules. She gives a definition to the Sacred Hadith as " that which Allah the Almighty has communicated to His Prophet through revelation or in dream and he, peace be upon him, has communicated it in his own words"(42) Her appearance is also Islamic : she tries to " look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerising as the Afghan princess she had once seen on TV wearing hijab, the daughter of an exiled leader of the mujahideen"(9). But her sticking to Islam increased her alienation as the English people are surprised to see a Muslim praying with his " forehead, nose and palms touching the ground"(76). Even she herself "wondered how Rae would feel if he ever saw her praying. Would he feel alienated from her, the difference between them accentuated, underlined..?"(76). In spite of his assertion that Sammar has "no problem at all" with the way she dresses in Aberdeen(89), Rae points to " the often hidden expression of disapproval, in that the patronizing assurance of acceptance is part of the covert hostility towards Sammar"(Steiner 9)

So religion alienates Sammar from people and especially from Rae. That is why she resorts to love which means, in the words of Kaiama L. Glover, " effacing the boundaries of language, of nation, of religion(203). In fact she is trying to get married again to get a "focus in my life "(29), not to be alone...If it took ten months or ten years or twenty or more"(179). She simplifies things to reach her goal, only "two witnesses and a gift" and she "could get married today"(127). She is aware of that she is "not beautiful" nor " feminine" to attract him(130). That is why she resorts to the use of all means of cunning and look "helpless and forlorn" to attract his sympathy(130). But the man does not respond to her feelings and totally neglects her courtship. That is why her friend Yasmin advises her to " avoid him like a plague " and to " go home and may be you'll meet someone normal, someone Sudanese like you"(93). Sammar insists on winning Rae whatever the price may be , until the man totally dismisses her, asking her to "get away from me"(131), thus ending her love adventure with a complete loss of her pride and dignity.

That is why Sammar resorts to flight, either spiritually or physically. As for spiritual flight, she resorted to diving "into the past"(30). "at the back of her mind", to see memorable things that would liberate her from incurable alienation. Here Tina Steiner finds " the alien and fragmented world of exile is encountered by nostalgic dreams of rootedness and cultural traditions, which stem from the culture of origin and are fuelled by sensual memories of a youth spent in the Sudan"(9-10). These "shimmering things" include the home where she was born, the streets where Tarig had ridden his bike, her aunt's house, laughter on their wedding, stray dogs on streets, the airport, fortune-tellers, and, most important , her son Amir and " feel guilty that she rarely thought of him, never dreamt of him"(113). Thus, in this " idealized picture of the past" or " invention of a mythical landscape"(Steiner7,11), she found " the recovery in limbs and parts of the mind that had not been used for a long time"(33).

It is clear that the most prominent causes of Sammar's alienation in Aboulela's *The Translator* are the failure to recognize social norms, feeling of ethnic and religious persecution, and frustrated love. At first, Sammar fails to accommodate to the social rules of her home country. For after the death of her husband Tareg in Aberdeen, Sammar (whose name in Arabic means entertainment or amusement) returns to Khartoum where she spends a short time and thinks in marrying an old family acquaintance called Ahmad Ali Yassen. This is against the norms of traditional Arab society in which a widow is not allowed to marry after the death of her husband, especially when she has a child, for whom she should sacrifice, and "not to be so selfish and bring him a stepfather, some stranger who will not treat him well"(87). That is why Sammar's aunt, who represents the traditional Arab norms, severely rejects the marriage proposal as follows:

You don't need marriage. What do you need it for? He started to take to me about this and I silenced him. I shamed him the old fool. He can take his religiousness and build a mosque but keep away from us(12)

In this respect, Tina Steiner writes about "the alienation Sammar suffers at home from her family, particularly her mother-in-law and her aunt, Mahasen. It is not very different from the alienation of Scotland"(12). That is why Sammar does not stay long in Khartoum and returns to Aberdeen, leaving behind her son Amir, "poor orphan, not yet two"(9) and to whom she is "paralysed, unresponsive"(24). She herself affirms that she is "unable to mother the child" and that "the part of her that did the mothering had disappeared"(7). All this represents her failure to recognize eastern, Arab social norms. That is why she greatly suffers alienation at her home country and consequently immigrates to Scotland where she suffers another types of alienation.

Sammar is also marginalized by her ethnic identity as an African, Muslim woman. She feels inferior to the white, blue-eyes Christian, western people especially after the 11/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. This feeling of ethnic persecution leads her to the feelings of estrangement, nothingness, separation, and exile. All people reject her because of her Islamic religion and African origins. Even towards Rae, who is supposed to be her support and resort, she feels alienated and marginalized:

Sammar felt separate from him, exiled while he was in his homeland, fasting while he was eating turkey and drinking wine. They lived in worlds divided by simple facts- religion, country of origin, race- data that fills forms(33)

Leila Aboulela dedicates the second half of her novel for Sammar's big physical flight where she comes back to her home country. There, she feels "not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots"(135). Her homecoming is the vital cure of her alienation, where she feels the warmth of her son, her family and her relatives. In her homeland everything is vivid and attractive: the sun, the trees, the birds, the children, the roads, and the stars(146). Sammar's self-identification and di-alienation in her homecoming is epitomized in the following passage:

Her homesickness was cured, her eyes cooled by what she saw, the colours and how the sky was so much bigger than the world below, transparent. She heard the sound of a bell as the single, silly light of a bicycle lamp jerked down the pitted road. A cat cried out like a baby and everything without a wind had a smell; sand and jasmine bushes, torn eucalyptus leaves(146-47)

Sammar realized that "her life was here", at her home country, where her son lives. She is no longer stranger, alone, and alienated. She decided to forget about Rae, "the sun and dust would erode her feelings for him"(160).

She intended to "the bottle of perfume he had given her", and "pull his words out of her head like seaweed and throw them away"(160). Instead of loving Rae, "she fell in love with Amir", whom he became the focus of her life(163). For the first time in her life, she yields to the social norms. In short, Sammar "was rarely alone. Almost never alone"(163). Besides, her homecoming "serves as a prelude to Rae's soul-searching, which will lead him to his own "leap of faith": from his secular, professional involvement with other cultures, to a more private commitment and immersion in faith"(Dimitriu 77).

For the first time in her own life Sammar is at the centre of her own feelings and actions, is sure that her work is genuine, creative, meaningful, and voluntarily. This is clear in her compliance with her maternal duties towards her son Amir, where she "carried him around the house, like Hanan carried her baby". Trying to atone for the sin of neglecting him in the past, she played a game and "pretended Amir was a baby again and she had to carry him". This is a symbolic of her restoration of her motherhood: "only in this game of baby and mother were they close"(162).

Sammar is also di-alienated from her labor towards family, relatives, and society. Her work has become voluntarily and creative in which she tries to fulfill herself and achieve success. It has become the satisfaction of her need for love, sincerity, and devotion:

Starting a new job, getting used to teaching... Picking Amir and Dalia up from school. Housework, in the evening a social life...Visitors or calling on people to offer condolences when death came, congratulations when a baby came. Welcome to the one who arrived from abroad, goodbye to the one who was going away...Here, her life was her(160-61)

Amidst this authentic, satisfactory life, an unexpected turning point occurs. In the past, Sammar hoped that Rae would convert to Islam and say the shahadah to be able to marry him, but the man denied her hope and dismissed her out of him. Now, Rae has converted and arrives Khartoum to marry Sammar, an event which she has been long dreaming of. At once, she accepts him as her husband and decides to accompany him to Aberdeen to resume her alienation again. But this time she will not suffer alienation alone, for she will make her son her companion, where he will be pulled out from his homeland to live as an alien in a strange land:

She was going to take Amir away from his cousins, his grandmother, his house. She was going to take him to a place that was all grey, its noises muffled by clouds, a new school where they might not like him much, look at him in a surprised way. And she was going to leave this city, its dust wind and smells(198-99)

Thus Sammar completes her circle of alienation which has started long ago with her father and husband, and will continue with her son. This is because the son is expected to suffer labour alienation, self- alienation, species being alienation, and fellow men alienation. He will suffer isolation, estrangement, separation, feeling of nothingness, in the same way as his mother, father and grandfather has suffered a long time ago. Not only the whole family cycle, but also its creator Leila Aboulela has suffered the same feeling of alienation. That is why in " And My fate Was Scotland" she writes:

I moved from heat to cold, from the Third World to the First- I adjusted, got used to the change over time. But in coming to Scotland, I also moved from a religious Muslim culture to a secular one and that move was the most disturbing of all, the trauma that no amount of could cure, an eternal cultural shock(189).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge the financial support of The Scientific Research Deanship at Aljouf University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia towards the production of this article.

CONCLUSIONS

Alienation is a characteristic theme in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*. This is because the titular heroine of the novel Sammar is a multi-alienated female character. From a Marxist perspective, Sammar is alienated from her work, from herself, from her species-being, and from other persons, especially from her son. From Hegel's view, Sammar loses her identity and stops identifying herself with her new society, beginning to be self-centered. Psychologically, Sammar is a Muslim stranger who feels hostility to the Western society to which she immigrated. Sociologically, she is unable to prove her own identity. That is why she resorts to physical and spiritual flight as she has no significant relationship with fellow people. Existentially, Sammar is a destroyed cast who is in desperate useless search for her lost identity. That is why she resorts to love and faith to prove herself, both of which increase her plight. The most important causes for alienation in Aboulela's novel are Sammar's frustrated love for the Western Rae; her failure to recognize social norms as a result of her leave of her poor son and her insistence to bring him a step father; and her feelings of ethnic and religious persecution as an African, Muslim woman who immigrates to Scotland for work.

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Source Citation (MLA7th Edition)

